

INFORMATION REPORT

COUNTRY China

CD NO.

SUBJECT Road Conditions in Northwest China

DATE DISTR. 21 JUL 50

NO. OF PAGES 4

PLACE
ACQUIRED

NO. OF ENCLS.
(LISTED BELOW)

DATE OF INFO.

SUPPLEMENT TO
REPORT NO.

25X1

THIS IS UNEVALUATED INFORMATION

1. Urumchi to Sian.*

Width:

The road from Urunchi to Shanshan (90-13, 42-54) is approximately eight yards wide. Two Dodge six-wheeled trucks can pass easily with a few feet to spare. This width is maintained, [redacted] all the way to Sian.

It is doubtful whether any vehicle much larger than a Dodge truck could travel these roads, for a longer vehicle would have difficulty in negotiating the bends at places such as: Hsinghsiahsia (95-09, 41-48), a mountain pass between Sinkiang and Kansu; between Shanshan and Ch'ich'iao-ching (91-34, 43-40); and Wu Chiao Ling (approximately 103- , 37-30). A wider vehicle would certainly be in danger of hitting the overhanging rocks on the mountain sides, and a heavier car would almost certainly cause the road to give way.

Surface:

There are no macadamized roads in this area. As most stretches run over typical Gobi surface, a macadamized surface is not needed except in wet weather.

The three types of surface most frequently encountered are: loess, sand and pebble, and sandstone or rock (infrequent). The first is practically impassable in wet weather, but dries out in 24 hours. The second is excellent when kept in repair, but tends to produce more ruts than occur in loess. Another disadvantage is that the pebbles and rocks knock the oil sumps and gas tanks of vehicles.

From Urumchi to Changyeh (100-37, 38-56) the road used to be in bad condition, but after the arrival of the Chinese Communists each village along the road produced a gang of six men whose job was to clear the road of rocks and patch up eroded places. The surface for the whole length of the road should now be in good condition, as the bulk of army

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Document No. 007
No Change In Class. ☒
☐ Declassified
Class. Changed To: TS S C
Auth.: HR 70-2
By: 22 100-200007-8

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transport must be over these roads.

The stretch between Suchou (98-33, 39-46) and Yungohang (102-07, 30-17) is exceptionally good. Its appearance does not indicate recent repair work.

Except in hilly areas it is possible to drive off the road, which usually runs at the same level as the surrounding land. At places between Urumchi and Lanchou it was often necessary to drive off on to the desert surface because the road was in bad condition. The only clearing necessary is the removal of boulders and larger pebbles.

Foundation:

The foundation is thought to be natural, there being no need for packing on Gobi surfaces. Loess, however, is not packed, except on mountain bends, and even here the roads are usually blocked by landslides after rains.

Ditches and culverts:

Ditches, dug to stop drifting sand, run alongside the road for long stretches. There are a few culverts running under the road in hilly areas, to lead off the gully rain waters. They occur only rarely, built of cement or occasionally of rocks, and were usually found in good condition.

Gradients:

The steepest gradients are over the Wu Chiao Ling pass between Kulang (102-54, 37-30) and P'ingfan (103-24, 36-44). The grade is not known, but a very old 2¹/₂-ton International, carrying almost 6 tons, was able to make the ascent in winter. Whether this could have been done in summer is open to question, as the engine overheated, and there are very few places where water can be obtained for the radiator. During the hottest months it is necessary to travel from dusk to dawn, not only because of the engine but also because of blow-outs resulting from expanded air. Russian tires suffer particularly badly in this respect.

The next gradient recalled by source was at the Hua Chia Ling pass in the Liup'anshan ranges (105- , 35-) between Lanchou and P'ingliang (106-29, 35-31), where passengers walked to the top of the pass and arrived fifteen minutes before the truck.

Curves and bends:

[] no curves which a truck of around 3-tons capacity would have any particular difficulty in negotiating without backing.

At the worst bends the road is still fairly well reinforced, but it would be easy to block both the passes mentioned above with landslides.

Bridges:

The only important bridge crossed was the well-known single-span structure at Lanchou. This is approximately a hundred yards in length, and can carry two-way truck traffic. There is also a pathway for pedestrians on either side of the span. This bridge was constructed at the turn of the century and is at least ten years over the contractor's guarantee.

There are innumerable small bridges along the road, half of which were destroyed by the Nationalists. However, these were found to be dispensable because the streams had dried up.

Gasoline:

it was possible to obtain gasoline at Urumchi, Turfan (89-05, 42-56), Hami

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(93-27, 42-48), Suchou, Changyeh, Wuwei (Liangchou, 102-48, 37-58), Lanchou and Sian. There are several other points where an occasional drum could be purchased at exorbitant prices, but they are unimportant. Everywhere gasoline is supplied in 50-gallon drums.

During the period between January and March 1950, all low-grade gasoline was obtained from the wells of the then China Petroleum Company, about forty kilometers from Suchou in the foothills of the Ch'ilienshan (98-39-). This is commonly referred to as Yumen oil.

Gasoline was obtainable on the free market at prices around one silver dollar, or approximately fifty cents in American money, per gallon. This price obtained at Suchou, but was from 20 to 40 percent higher in Urumchi and Lanchou. [] gasoline is now cheaper at Urumchi, and comes from Russian-operated fields in Sinkiang Province. It is rumored, [] that the Yumen fields are to be turned over to lubricating oil and that gasoline production will be centralized in Sinkiang.

Tires:

Prior to February 1950 there was a shortage of all types of tires, but a convoy of eight Dodge six-wheeled trucks were observed taking tires up from Lanchou toward Urumchi. These were mostly U. S. Royal tires of varying sizes. All trucks repair their own tires. The outer tubing is often riveted if it has been gashed by a rock. The Russians are supplying some tires of the smaller sizes, but the Chinese think very little of these because they wear out too quickly and burst easily.

Types of trucks observed:

The commonest type of truck is the six-wheeled Dodge, about 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ tons; next comes the Studebaker and innumerable other American makes. The presence of Russian ZIS (about 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ tons) and Molotov Aftomat (about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ -2 tons) is becoming more apparent, but these trucks do not stand up to the heavy going and, except for the fact that they are new, are not popular among the Chinese. The principal worry of the Chinese is the scarcity of tires and spare parts for their Dodges and Studebakers, but it would appear that a slow trickle of these is coming through.

2. Lanchou to Changyeh, via Hsining.

Width, surface and foundation:

These are approximately the same as on the road from Urumchi to Sian described above. The stretch from Lanchou to Hsining is fairly good, but beyond Hsining repairs are needed. No work was in progress.

Gradients:

The worst gradient was from the southern foothills of the Ch'ilienshan, over the Ta ran Shan pass. This was extremely steep, [] to partially unload [] 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -ton trucks and use jeeps in 4-wheel drive to haul them up. Three [] trucks went over the side on the descent, but this was the result of bad driving and faulty brakes. The road surface on this pass is good. From Peitat'ung (101-31, 37-19) to Hungshui (100-54, 36-25) there is another pass which is harder going than Ta ran Shan, but not as high. Here the road is very bad and very narrow.

The pass between Peitat'ung and Hungshui has parts where a six-wheeled Dodge truck can just scrape through, and is extremely dangerous. There are several points where a vehicle would have to be partly off-loaded.

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Ferries:

There is a ferry at the Tat'ung River, which runs past Peitai'ung. This is a single boat, just large enough for a Dodge 4-door sedan, which is hauled across the river by means of a pulley on the guide rope. It is propelled by manpower.

Gasoline:

Gasoline can be obtained at Lsining.

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3. Lanchou to Tingyuanying (105-36, 36-48).

Surface:

This road is very similar to others in northwest China. It was in very good repair and compared roughly to the strip between Suchou and Changyeh. The part from Minghsia to Tingyuanying, however, is very bad, although it runs along a fairly flat surface. There are long stretches over desert where there is no water or shade. During the months [redacted] 25X1 this road there was grave danger of blow-outs, and the tires had to be cooled in water every hour or so.

Another bad area is from Minghsia to Lanchou via the direct route through Minganpao (105-38, 37-24) and Talach'ih (104-50, 36-42), where there is very little water and the roads are poor.

Width:

There is a very bad strip between Tingyuanying and Minghsia consisting of a narrow defile where it was necessary to alight and walk for two or three hundred yards. A 2-ton truck just managed to scrape through.

Gradients:

The road runs over the southern tip of the Ala Shan. It is not high but badly surfaced.

Ferries:

There is a ferry in the area of Minganpao and another at Chingyuan (104-32, 36-37). Wooden Chinese boats are used at both places.

At Minganpao the boats were towed upstream and then rowed downstream across the river. Their maximum capacity was a jeep and a Dodge six-wheeled truck.

At Chingyuan the boats, slightly smaller than at Minganpao, were coupled to a motor launch and towed across.

Gasoline:

Gasoline could be obtained at Minghsia.

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* [redacted] Comment. [redacted] reports that the Chinese Communists proposed to improve the highway between Sinkiang Province and Lanchou.

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